

Struck by a car

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"Living Lore in N.E." Series

Francis Donovan

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Struck by a car on Main Street one evening last week, Bob Woods, janitor of the town hall building has not yet returned to his duties, and his friends are concerned about him, though his condition is reported not serious. During his absence there has been a chimney fire in the town hall and several persons have fallen on the icy sidewalk in front of the building --occurrences which his cronies point out triumphantly have been without precedent since the mind of man runneth not to the contrary. The conclusion is inescapable that had Mr. Woods been on duty nothing untoward would have happened.

In the Fire House today Mr. MacCurrie is talking with John Braden, brother-in-law of Mr. Woods, and a former local resident, who has come up from Waterbury to call on the convalescent, and to renew old acquaintance. Mr. Braden is a Scotch-Irish gentleman with the old country burr still clinging to his tongue despite long years of residence in this country. They are talking about the Waterbury fraud case.

Mr. MacCurrie: "I see they've got the fourteenth juror picked at last. Came over the radio this noon."

Mr. Braden: "Well, how the devil are they goin' to prove those fellas guilty, when the trial finally does start, that's what I'd like to know."

Mr. MacCurrie: "Mon, they've got plenty on them. Didn't you read the grand jury report? All that money that was paid to lawyers 2 and the like o' that. Don't you suppose they'll go into all that at the trial? When they get some of those fellas on the stand they'll get all mixed up. Some of them will make mistakes and say the wrong thing."

Mr. Braden: "Yus, I suppose you're right. That city hall janitor, he threw himself on the mercy of the court. He'll make a good witness."

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Mr. MacCurrie: "And so will that lad in the controller's office. He turned against his old friends. He'll be a great witness for the state. When the new controller came in, it was him showed him what had been goin' on there."

Mr. Braden: "Well, they tell some great stories. I heard of one, a lad told down there, I don't know how true it was, but I wouldn't doubt it. Seemed he'd done a little work for the city, and his bill was three hundred dollars. He got a check for thirteen hundred. He went to the controller, and he says, 'There must be some mistake, my bill was only three hundred dollars.' The controller says, 'You cash that check, Mister, and bring back the change.' That's supposed to be a true story.

Mr. MacCurrie: "I wouldn't doubt it. Goddom it, look at what they did with that New Haven lawyer. Sendin' him doon seven thousand dollars in a little black bag and tellin' him to keep his mouth shut."

Mr. Braden: "Yus. You know, if they'd won this election, if the controller hadn't got in like he did, by the skin of his teeth, they would have had it all covered up. Nobody would have ever found out about it. Mon dear, the gang that was in before them was just 3 as bad. But they got away with it, because they were succeeded by their own kind."

Mr. MacCurrie: "See where they even been robbin' the subway doon in New York. The graft that goes on in this country is somethin' terrible."

Mr. Braden: "Yus. Well, I've got to get along up to see Bob. Time I get back down it'll be just about time for the bus. I'm glad to have seen you fellas again."

We bid Mr. Braden goodbye. Mr. MacCurrie, who has deviated from routine because of the visit of his old friend, prepares to take his postponed constitutional. "It's dom near too cold to go out," he says. "I won't take such a long one today."

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He has gone but a few minutes, when Mr. Coburn arrives. Mr. Coburn is a young man, probably in his early thirties, who has been unemployed for several months. Unmarried and devil-may-care, his conversation runs largely to "parties," and "good times." He says he had fully intended to go to the movies this afternoon.

"But what the hell, it don't look so good. The ones they have durin' the middle of the week are mostly lousy. That one Sunday night was damn good. The Citadel. Supposed to be the best picture of the year. But this damn thing. Some kind of a second rate detective picture.

And some other one I never heard of.

"What the hell do they show those double features for, will you tell me? Like the one they had Sunday night. The Citadel was a good movie ---one of the best I see this year --- but that other thing was just a waste of time. One good picture and a few shorts and the newsreel ---that's enough for me. I like the news reels.

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I'd like to see a newsreel theater in Waterbury, like they have in New York."

Mr. Coburn lights a cigarette, tosses the match expertly into a cuspidor several feet away.

"I was comin' down here yesterday afternoon, and I see an old friend of mine," he says.

"Gabby Keenan. Remember him? I ain't seen him since he moved away. He's married and got a kid, he says. We only talked for a few minutes and then he had to go. Said his wife was waitin' for him.

"What a guy he used to be. I remember when his old man first got that big Buick. I used to go out with Gabby quite a lot. Remember the money there used to be floatin' around in those days? Oh Boy! One Sunday afternoon Gabby and I got in a crap game up behind the billboard on North Main Street. Well, I say we got in it, but here's how it was.

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"He didn't have any dough, and I had a couple of bucks. He says to me, 'you got any money?' I says, 'Yes, but I don't know how to play the game, I never shot crap in my life before.

"He says, 'Pick up them dice and put down a buck. You and me are partners,' he says. 'You roll 'em, and I'll tell you what to do.'

"Well, I done like he said, and Jeez, did I go to town. It was Coburn's day, all right, what they call beginners luck. When the game broke up a few hours later, me and Keenan split about seventy bucks. Not bad, for a Sunday afternoon, hey?

"Of course they was all Thomaston fellas in the game --well, I'm gettin' ahead of my story. Gabby says, 'What are you doin' tonight? I says 'Nothin' that I know of. He says, '[Be around, we'll take in?] 5 a show or somethin'.'

"So that night we were all up in front of the drugstore, myself and most of the lads that were in the game; and Gabby rolls up in the big Buick. He comes over and he says, 'George, we cleaned up on these fellas this afternoon, it's no more than right that we should treat 'em.

Spend some of their own money on them.' I says okay, so six of us piles in the car. We went to Waterbury and we went to a show--I think it was Poli's--it was vaudeville, I remember. Then somebody said, 'Let's have a drink.' So we went to two - three joints, but we couldn't get in.

"Finally one of the lads says I know where we can get some Dago wine, if you want it, and he leads us around an alley and up a flight of stairs, and knock at the door, and this old Eytalian let us in and sold us a gallon of wine in a jug. Well we come out of there and somebody says I'm hungry, so they started arguin' about where to go.

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"Gabby was flush, of course, so he says 'Let's go to Thorpe's.' Somebody says, 'What, with this wine?'

"That's okay,' says Gabby, 'you just follow me.'

"Can you imagine goin' in a place like that with a gallon of wine? This was durin' prohibition, remember. Well we got there, and then we were stuck for a way to get it in. Finally Gabby grabs it and wraps it up in a coat, and in we go. Upstairs. A place with five or six nice neat little tables in it. Lucky there wasn't nobody else there.

"We all sat down and ordered sandwiches. And then one of the damn fools ordered hot chocolate, and the others did too. Gabby and 6 me tried to talk them out of it, but nothing doin'. Imagine drinkin' hot chocolate and wine. They brought the stuff and lads drank their hot chocolate. All but me and Gabby. Then they started pourin' the wine into the empty cups and drinkin' it. Well in about five minutes, one of them got sick. And what I mean, he was sick!

"We just grabbed him and the wine jug and left some money on the table and ran like hell out of there. I never went in again either.

Afraid they might recognize me."

Mr. MacCurrie has returned. He has the paper under his arm, but Mr. Coburn is occupying his favorite chair and he retires to another corner.

"Well," says Mr. Coburn, "Them were the days, weren't they? Lots of money and lots of fun. Sometimes feel sorry for the kids growin' up now. They don't know what it is to have a good time."